

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics>

Volume 27, 2020

*The Fifth Corner of Four: An Essay on Buddhist
Metaphysics and the Catuskoṭi*

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A Review of *The Fifth Corner of Four: An Essay on Buddhist Metaphysics and the Catuṣkoṭi*

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The Fifth Corner of Four: An Essay on Buddhist Metaphysics and the Catuṣkoṭi. By Graham Priest. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, xx + 172 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-875871-6 (Hardcover), \$60.00.

Graham Priest's book, *The Fifth Corner of Four: An Essay on Buddhist Metaphysics and the Catuṣkoṭi*, can be read in the context of the concerted effort that has been taking place for a little over a decade among Anglophone teachers of philosophy to grapple with Asian philosophy. Around 2006, the American Philosophical Association (APA) formed a committee called The Committee on Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies, whose charges include "to promote the interaction between Asian and Western philosophical traditions and to help draw out their mutual relevance" ("Committee: Asian & Asian-American Philosophers & Philosophies"). Other philosophers, who have never done so in the past, have recently produced books with sections broadly glossing topics in Asian philosophy. These include A. C. Grayling's *The History of Philosophy* (2019), which discusses the teachings of the Buddha in only one of its 704 pages,

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although it does include a slightly longer section on Nāgārjuna. Grayling posts a disclaimer at the beginning of the three chapters on Asian philosophy, saying that he is an observer, not an expert, but that a treatment of Asian philosophy is “a requisite for the serious student of ideas” (513). Priest makes a similar, if milder, statement, revealing that he has relied on Jay Garfield for much of his understanding of Nāgārjuna.

Those of us who left philosophy for Buddhist Studies during less conciliatory times soon discovered that we did not need the field to understand our topics; we needed languages. Nevertheless, after graduate school, we were once again in departments controlled by those who had afforded sneers and jeers as we left and who considered us to be strange bedfellows when we came back. That is why, at the 2020 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religions, another field where we are Capulets to their Montagues, we formed a roundtable on “Buddhist Philosophy in Philosophy Departments: Training Students, Hiring, Teaching.” In that context, one of the strategies I propose for those on the job market—as well as individuals with secured positions in philosophy departments—is to use the bridges created by Priest and other philosophers to approach these colleagues, even though you may find their writings otherwise useless and sometimes wrongheaded.

Graham Priest, who teaches at City University of New York (CUNY), is a specialist in logic and is well known for his defense of dialetheism, a word he coined to mean two contradictory statements can both be true. According to a standard view in logic, outside of Asian philosophy and dating back to Aristotle, contradictories such as “All men are mortal; some men are not mortal” cannot both be true. Priest was trained as a mathematician and became interested in Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorems, which holds “This sentence is not provable” to be true but not provable. From there, Priest considered other statements that have puzzled philosophers such as the Liar’s Paradox: “This sentence is false.” Eventually he came to the controversial conclusion that it’s not that such paradoxes are incomplete as Gödel suggested but they achieve what they

set out to do. That is, according to Priest, these paradoxes show that certain contradictions are true, which he called dialetheism. This is the perspective from which he approaches Nāgārjuna's *catuṣkoṭi* or tetralemma. This may immediately raise concerns for those in Buddhist Studies, as Priest is applying an incommensurable standard to Nāgārjuna, assuming that his *catuṣkoṭi* presents a paradox comparable to the Liar's Paradox, that its alleged contradictions are true, and that through it, Nāgārjuna is establishing his own position, which Priest calls the fifth corner of four.

Historically in Buddhist Studies (although not always), we have considered Nāgārjuna's *catuṣkoṭi* to be a method of refuting all positions, including one that a fifth corner would imply. There are many statements that suggest this in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, some of which Priest quotes in defense of his opposite position. Priest sets out in chapter five, "The Fifth Corner," to prove through symbolic logic that the lines of Nāgārjuna's tetralemma are only logically consistent with one another if we accept that he is suggesting a thesis in a clandestine manner. Priest names this thesis, which constitutes the fifth corner, "the ineffable." From start to finish, Priest's book is a progressive argument meant to prove this interpretation, which he acknowledges from time to time, if in understated ways, is not universally accepted by other scholars. As pieces of evidence for his interpretation, Priest further interprets notions of "things in themselves," "emptiness," and "ultimate truth," each of which, according to Priest, imply ineffable existents. He argues this, for example, by referring to Kant's transcendental idealism for a discussion of things in themselves, rather than Buddhist uses of the term, such as found in Yogācāra theses, including Kuiji's *Commentary on the Cheng weishi lun* (*Cheng weishi lun shuji* 成唯識論述記) which states, "If you say that the seen aspect of consciousness and the seeing aspect of consciousness have different seeds, then seeing is divided into the thing in itself (*ziti* 自體, literally the self-substance) and its functions (*yi Yong* 義用)."²

² See, for example, T1830_43.0241a13–a14. My translation.

To highlight how the lack of universal acceptance of Priest's interpretation has historical significance, we can mention an enduring problem in Japanese Buddhism. In his *Transmission of the Buddha Dharma in Three Countries* (*Sangoku buppō denzū engi* 三國佛法傳通緣起), the Japanese Buddhist historian Gyōnen 凝然 (1240–1321) mentions that there are points of contention that persisted as the basis of factionalism for at least 500 years in Japanese Buddhism (Green and Mun 2018, 127) as first seen in *The Record of the Light of the Lamp of Hossō* (*Hossō tōmyō ki* 法相燈明記) by the Yogācāra monk Zen'an 慚安 in 815.³ Among these points of disagreement, ten concern “the inner studies” (*adhyātma-vidyā*, 內明), that is, Buddhist Studies, and six have to do with the light of reason or logic (*hetuvidyā* 因明). Many in both categories involve disparate interpretations of ultimate truth, emptiness, and existents. We see this, for example in Zen'an's description of the eleventh point, which is the first *hetuvidyā* problem, as follows.

... a logical inference in the *Mahāyāna Jewel in the Hand Treatise* (*Mahāyāna-hastaratna-sāstra*) that says “[in terms of true nature] the conditioned is empty”⁴ has a fallacy that the subject (*dharmin*) is partly not established.⁵ Among the interpretations of this, the others [Gangōji] say that only [the part that says] ‘true nature’ has the fallacy that the subject is not established. Some among them say that this fallacy lies in the fact [that *Bhāviveka*] characterizes existents as only being empty. Yamashina-dera [Kōfukuji] says that the four characters “In its true nature, the conditioned” (*zhenxing youwei* 真性有爲) has [the fallacy] that the subject is

³ T 2310, 1 fascicle.

⁴ Zen'an, T 1578.30.268b21–22: 真性有爲空 如幻緣生故 無為無有實 不起似空華。

⁵ Zen'an, T 2310.71.49b25: 掌珍論有爲空量有有法一分不成過。 *Mahāyāna-hastaratna-sāstra* was translated by Xuanzang, T 1578, and retranslated into Sanskrit.

partly not established. (T 2310.71.49b25–49c3, my translation)

A commentary by Zen'an's contemporary Gomyō 護命 (750–834), head of Gangōji temple, explains that the problem in the inference lies in the fact that the author, Bhāviveka, says that phenomenal illusion is empty without saying it is also existent or nonempty. In this way, the subject is partly not established in the minor premise.⁶ Priest is responsible for committing this fallacy according to the *hetuvidyā* system, which is different from his own. The Japanese scholar priests on both sides of the debate, Zen'an of Kōfukuji Temple and Gomyō of Gangōji Temple, reference the Chinese founder of the Faxiang School, Kuiji 窺基 (632–682), in support of their arguments, pointing to a depth in the analyses of “things in themselves,” “emptiness,” and “ultimate truth” according to Nāgārjuna's *catuṣkoṭi* far exceeding that of Priest's analysis. In fairness, Priest directs English readers to Jan Westerhoff's *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction* (2009) where, he says, “A lot of unpacking is done” concerning the *catuṣkoṭi* (Priest 2018, 55).⁷ Nevertheless, his presentation maintains what I read as a defense of the idea that phenomenal illusion is empty without saying it is also existent or nonempty (or vice versa), effectively reifying “the ineffable” as Kuiji believed Bhāviveka had done. Other than this “misinterpretation,” according to Gomyō and others including the 14th Dalai Lama (without Bhāviveka as a disqualifier), Yogācāra and Madhyamaka philosophies are not at odds.

According to Priest, if we don't accept “the ineffable” (as an existent, in my opinion), the following problem can be discerned by scrutinizing Nāgārjuna's *catuṣkoṭi* through the lens of European logic. Priest says

⁶ Gomyō, *Daijō hossō kenjinshō* 大乘法相研神章 (A Brief Study of the Mahāyāna Yogācāra) T 2309.71.24c1–c7. For a larger discussion of this, see Green 2020.

⁷ There seems to be a mistake in Priest's text concerning this reference, which appears in a footnote on page 55 as Westerhoff (2009), but does not appear in the bibliography with this date. Instead, the bibliography shows a 2010 publication by Westerhoff, and it is cited with the incorrect title: *Nāgārjuna's Metaphysics: A Philosophical Introduction*.

each of the four lines of the *catuṣkoṭi* involve *reductio ad absurdum*, in a similar way that he says dependent co-arising does, in that everything arises from something else that arose from something else, *ad infinitum*. But only by adding the eclipsed fifth sentence, intentionally left out by Nāgārjuna because ultimate truth is unspoken (ineffable), does “the whole machinery now make sense” (68) as follows (where *A* is a state of affairs, “obtains” means it is true, “-” means “not”, *t* means true, *f* means false, *b* means both, *n* means neither, and *e* means none of the above).

- A has the value *t*: *A* is effable, *A* obtains and $\neg A$ does not.
- A has the value *f*: *A* is effable, $\neg A$ obtains and *A* does not.
- A has the value *b*: *A* is effable, both *A* and $\neg A$ obtain.
- A has the value *n*: *A* is effable, neither *A* nor $\neg A$ obtains.
- A has the value *e*: *A* is ineffable (as is $\neg A$) (68).

As fun (if simplistic) as this is, from a different perspective, it would have been better if Priest sought in this way to disprove the validity of the *catuṣkoṭi* based on the notion that indeed the whole machine does *not* make sense. After all, as Priest quotes Nāgārjuna from the *Mūlamadh-yamakakārikā* in the previous chapter on emptiness:

I prostrate to Gautama
Who through compassion
Taught the true doctrine,
Which leads to the relinquishing of all views. (57)⁸

Like other recent books by philosophers referencing Asian philosophy, *The Fifth Corner of Four* may be most suitable for an audience trained in the field of Philosophy rather than Buddhist Studies. We are witness to a time that may prove transitional in a merger of the two disciplines, further precipitated by the international routing of education toward STEM. But as it stands now, those trained in philosophy typically are not schooled in Asian traditions and neither were their teachers. Although this is clear in

⁸ Translation from Garfield 1995, 352.

Priest's book, perhaps that writing might still inspire its audience to look a little deeper into our subject. This clearly marks a change in the field from a time it was apparently okay to say, as Hegel did, that Asian history is actually "unhistory," since it had allegedly failed to achieve individual freedom and, as a result, only Western Europeans were capable of realizing higher truths about *Geist*. Hegel was obviously oblivious to the Upaniṣads. As a number of scholars in the field, including Grayling and of course Priest, have been easily attracted to Madhyamaka's *catuṣkoṭi* because of how it looks through the circumscriptions of their lens, I predict that very soon they will discover Yogācāra's *hetuvidyā* for similar reasons. I hope we can meet at the APA for a dialogue before publications result from this.

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